



DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE

National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration

[RTID 0648-XC630]

Marine Mammals; File No. 24378

AGENCY: National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS), National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), Commerce.

ACTION: Notice; receipt of application for permit amendment.

SUMMARY: Notice is hereby given that The University of Alaska Southeast, 1332 Seward Ave, Sitka, AK 99835 (Responsible Party: Jan Straley), has applied for an amendment to scientific research Permit No. 24378.

DATES: Written, telefaxed, or email comments must be received on or before *[INSERT DATE 30 DAYS AFTER DATE OF PUBLICATION IN THE FEDERAL REGISTER]*.

ADDRESSES: The application and related documents are available for review by selecting “Records Open for Public Comment” from the “Features” box on the Applications and Permits for Protected Species (APPS) home page, <https://apps.nmfs.noaa.gov>, and then selecting File No. 24378 from the list of available applications. These documents are also available upon written request via email to NMFS.Pr1Comments@noaa.gov.

Written comments on this application should be submitted via email to NMFS.Pr1Comments@noaa.gov. Please include File No. 24378 in the subject line of the email comment.

Those individuals requesting a public hearing should submit a written request via email to NMFS.Pr1Comments@noaa.gov. The request should set forth the specific reasons why a hearing on this application would be appropriate.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT: Courtney Smith, Ph.D., or Shasta McClenahan, Ph.D., (301) 427-8401.

SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION: The subject amendment to Permit No. 24378 is requested under the authority of the Marine Mammal Protection Act of 1972, as amended (16 U.S.C. 1361 *et seq.*), the regulations governing the taking and importing of marine mammals (50 CFR part 216), the Endangered Species Act of 1973, as amended (16 U.S.C. 1531 *et seq.*), and the regulations governing the taking, importing, and exporting of endangered and threatened species (50 CFR parts 222-226), and the Fur Seal Act of 1966, as amended (16 U.S.C. 1151 *et seq.*).

Permit No. 24378, issued on April 29, 2021, (86 FR 26013, May 12, 2021), authorizes the permit holder to conduct research on 18 species of cetaceans in Alaska, focusing on humpback (*Megaptera novaeangliae*), killer (*Orcinus orca*), and sperm (*Physeter macrocephalus*) whales. The objective of the research is to further the biological understanding of Alaskan cetaceans by evaluating species abundance, population and stock structure, life history parameters, foraging behavior and prey specialization, social behavior, seasonal movements and migrations, and depredation interactions with longline fishing vessels. Research methods include close approach by vessels and unmanned aircraft systems to conduct activities that may result in Level B harassment including photo-identification, behavioral observations, underwater photography/video, active acoustic sonar for prey mapping, biological sampling (prey samples, exhaled air, sloughed skin, feces), and collection of eDNA. The research also includes activities that may result in Level A harassment including biopsy sampling and tagging (suction-cup and dart/barb). Some marine mammal parts may be exported for analysis.

The permit holder is requesting the permit be amended to increase annual takes of gray whales (*Eschrichtius robustus*) from 100 to 250 for activities that may cause Level

B harassment; and increase from 20 to 100 annual takes for biopsy sampling. The purpose of the requested amendment is to add a new study and objectives that will allow researchers to better understand the increasing gray whale presence, population dynamics, demographics, and foraging strategies in Sitka Sound. The permit will expire on April 30, 2026.

In compliance with the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 (42 U.S.C. 4321 *et seq.*), an initial determination has been made that the activity proposed is categorically excluded from the requirement to prepare an environmental assessment or environmental impact statement.

Concurrent with the publication of this notice in the ***Federal Register***, NMFS is forwarding copies of this application to the Marine Mammal Commission and its Committee of Scientific Advisors.

Dated: December 27, 2022.

Julia M. Harrison,

Chief, Permits and Conservation Division,

Office of Protected Resources,

National Marine Fisheries Service.